



BLACK CAMERA

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Director's Notes

Haunting History with Truth:

The Middle Passage (1999)

What is Africa to me? That question is anchored in the subtext of African American explorations of race and identity, and has lingered there long after Countee Cullen immortalized these words in his 1926 poem, "Heritage."

Today, musings about a long-lost African past are a recurring focus of Afrocentric impulses in black communities. Such musings are immediately recognizable in the symbolic displays of kente cloth and other choices in clothing, hair styles, naming practices, and ceremonies that are nearly ubiquitous now in black popular culture. On a deeper level, associations between Africans and African Americans have been more problematic; a by-product of inadequate knowledge of each other's history. There is a specific ignorance about the basic essential connections forged among Africans in captivity during the grueling voyage of no return that forced millions from diverse West African ethnic and linguistic groups into the amorphous and humanly diminished category of 'black slave.'

The Middle Passage, the "route that will forever haunt history," is the subject of a visually and emotionally wrenching documentary by filmmaker Guy Deslauriers. HBO's presentation of this narrative told in the voice of a captured male was one of the multiple television offerings on worthy topics slated for Black History Month. (A pity that the month is so short. Who knows what is

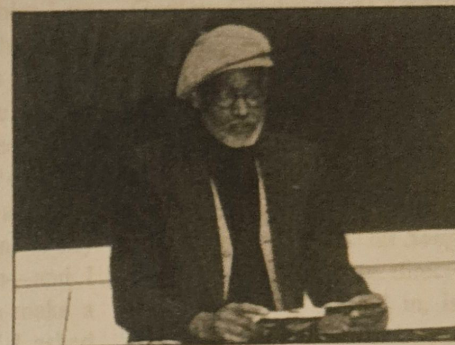
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Kickin' Science: Legendary Filmmaker Melvin Van Peebles is Inaugural BFC/A Artist-In-Residence

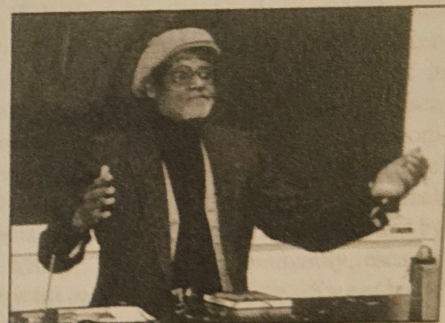
by Crystal L. Keels

Consummate artist and legendary international filmmaker Melvin Van Peebles tells *fantastic* stories. Regardless of the medium he chooses, whether speaking in person, or through literature, music, or film, audiences can consistently expect the unexpected. Ask Van Peebles how he became a filmmaker, for instance, and he will tell you about his experience as a navigator in the Air Force; his sojourn in Mexico (where he was a portrait painter); his work as a cable car driver in San Francisco; how he taught himself film technology; his rejection of a job offer as an elevator operator in Hollywood (a position they offered rather than take him seriously as a filmmaker); his pursuit of doctoral studies in Amsterdam (celestial mechanics, an esoteric branch of astronomy); a postcard sent to him in Holland from the French Cinematheque recognizing his earliest film work; his subsequent reception at the Champs Elysees; the five French novels he authored; the San Francisco Film Festival he attended as the *French* representative to the U.S.; and *Watermelon Man* (1970), the first Hollywood film he directed. Then he will tell you about the making of *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), the remarkable

continued on page 2



Filmmaker Melvin Van Peebles during his special public presentation of "Kickin' Science: An Evening with Melvin Van Peebles," February 1, 2002.



Also inside this issue:



Filmmaker Gloria Rolando:
Exploring Complex Cuban Roots . . .3

Communal Cinema
in a Global Context5

Film Reviews:
Lumumba (2000)8
Black Orpheus (1959)9

Black Film Fact5

Remembering Rogosin10

From the Archive10

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Kickin' Science: Legendary Filmmaker Melvin Van Peebles Inaugural BFC/A Artist-In-Residence *continued from page 1*

independent film that shattered conventional representations of blacks in film and broke both box office records and racial barriers in Hollywood. The phenomenal success of *Sweetback*, which was initially

rated X and opened in only two theaters in the United States, sparked in its wake the film careers of a few black directors in Hollywood while it also spawned Hollywood's infamous blaxploitation era.

Director's Notes *continued from page 1*

being shelved until next BHM, since the Delphic Oracle has obviously declared, "Thou shall only present shows with black themes during February!")

Nevertheless, the 1999 documentary was worth the wait. *The Middle Passage* addresses centuries of accumulated igno-

and reflect upon these fateful oceanic crossings. The rebellion in the eyes of the nameless captured would have to wait for another day of reckoning. The question of what Africa means to me begins here, in the bowels of slave ships, with a sense of simmering displacement and discontent.

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rance, willful and otherwise, in a riveting reenactment of one of thousands of these God-forsaken journeys. "What have we done to so enrage our ancient ancestors?" the enslaved narrator asks. The question hangs heavy over the bodies of women, men, and children, stuffed sardine-like into the bowels of the rat-infested ship. The journey was to last up to six months and to cause the death of one third of the human cargo. Their enslavers, a motley band of white entrepreneurial adventurers and rapists, had purchased them from an African king. "I was traded for a barrel of gunpowder," the narrator decries. Such thick complicity retards, but does not extinguish our need to confront, absorb,

The prophetic words of the nameless narrator expressed it well: We Africans understand the mysteries. We are dying but we will be reborn.... a new people will emerge into a world filled with scorn.

This issue marks the evolution of *Black Camera* into a micro journal that will feature short essays, interviews, and digests of new scholarship on black film studies. We are happy to begin this new direction by engaging in a discussion of recent African diasporic cinema. The focus of this issue includes Cuba, Congo, and South Africa.

-Audrey T. McCluskey,
Director

These are some of the stories he shared with a standing room audience of students, staff, faculty, and the public during his special public presentation, "Kickin' Science: An Evening with Melvin Van Peebles," on February 1, 2002, as the Black Film Center/Archive's inaugural Artist-In-Residence.

"When I first started out in cinema," Van Peebles explained, "I called a guy—this is really the extent of my filmmaking education—and I told him I wanted to make a film. He said, 'Yes.' I asked him, 'How long is a film?' He said, 'About 90 minutes.' He asked, 'Are you going to shoot in 16 or 35?' I said, 'What's that?' He said, '16 or 35 millimeters.' I said, 'Oh. What's that?' I didn't even know what a millimeter was. I had never seen *Potemkin*, *Citizen Kane*, or any of those films. I just got tired of seeing Negroes in film saying, 'Lawd have mercy.' That was what I *didn't* want to see. I was motivated by a global distaste. I discovered that I could do better."

What he has accomplished is not simply better. Indeed, any candid assessment of Van Peebles' artistic production in a career that spans over several decades distinguishes him as one of the most formidable influences in late 20th-century creative expression. He ironically gained recognition first in France where he received critical acclaim for *The Story of a Three-Day Pass* (1967), his first feature film that was based upon one of his novels, *La Permission*. As the award-winning French representative to the 1967 San Francisco Film Festival, Van Peebles garnered the attention of the same Hollywood film industry that

because of racist exclusionary practices previously prohibited his participation. Under contract with Columbia Studios, he directed *Watermelon Man* (1970), a satire starring Godfrey Cambridge as a white man who wakes one morning to discover that he is black, and an endeavor that fueled Van Peebles' prolific artistic career.

His next project, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), which he wrote, directed, scored, and starred in, is the story of a young black man who is forced to become a fugitive after he kills two white policemen as they brutalize another black man. At the time of its release, *Sweetback* generated a furor because of its depictions of violence, sex, and its uncompromising commentary on racial injustice. The film resonated with black audiences as the hero, aided by the black community, escapes with his life. *Sweetback* remains on record as one of the top-grossing independent films of all time and has been cited as the inaugural text of post-Civil Rights films that dared to represent the conflicts of race in the United States. The soundtrack, written by Van Peebles and performed by R&B group Earth, Wind, and Fire, plays an integral part in the film, a technique that today is *de rigueur*, but was then unprecedented. The music also became the vehicle for marketing the film while, as most media outlets refused to advertise *Sweetback* because of its controversial rating and its unconventional title, black radio deejays gave the music airtime prior to the film's

continued on page 6

Kickin' Science: Legendary Filmmaker Melvin Van Peebles is Inaugural BFC/A Artist-In-Residence

continued from page 2

release. Van Peebles chronicles his incredible experiences with the film in *The Making of Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, which critic John Williams describes as "the indisputable prototype" for how-to-books on filmmaking, and which is now a staple in film courses across the country.

Internationally recognized, Melvin Van Peebles' work is infused with passion, humor, and insight. In 1990 Van Peebles was the first black filmmaker honored with a retrospective of his work at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York, and he recently received the French Legion of Honor. *Classified X* (1988), a documentary written, directed, and narrated by Van Peebles about the fraught history of African American images in American cinema,

was recently awarded Best Documentary Film at the Urbanworld International Film Festival and was selected for screening at the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences Human Rights Festival. His latest film, *Le Conte du Ventre Plein/ A Belly Full* (2000), a French work with English subtitles, satirizes the hypocrisy of a conservative white couple in France who hire a black orphan to work as a waitress in their restaurant and then convince her to pretend she is pregnant. *Le Conte du Ventre Plein/ A Belly Full* was recently selected for the Cannes Film Festival and also won the Acapulco Black Film Festival. In addition to his extensive work in film as a writer, director, producer, and actor, Van Peebles' credits include seven Tony nominations for his

Broadway production *Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death* (1971), one of two musicals he wrote, produced, and scored. He has also made significant contributions to contemporary television and Hollywood film as well, including *The Outer Limits* (1995), *The Shining* (1997), *Panther* (1995), and *Posse* (1993), the latter two endeavors in collaboration with his son, actor/director Mario Van Peebles.

Melvin Van Peebles shared his expertise with I.U. students from a cross-section of disciplines in a weeklong intensive screenwriting and production workshop. Students began the week by proposing various story ideas that were then shaped and reshaped under his guidance in a collaborative setting. During the workshop Van Peebles stressed several imper-

atives including the importance of flexibility in the screenwriting process, the business aspect of such an endeavor, and the requisite need to understand the cinema as a vehicle of mass media. "If you are writing a screenplay," Van Peebles told students, "even if you have the money to make the film yourself, you have a boss. Your final boss is the public. If you are going to go into cinema, you have got to learn to control your muse because your muse will say, 'No! This is what we gotta do.' You have to say to your muse, 'No! This won't work.' Once you've got that control, your muse will come back and say, 'Okay.'"

This is sound advice from someone who has been successful in his quest to tell stories different from the traditional tales told in cinema. "Over his forty-year career Melvin Van Peebles has been able to make the kind of films that redefine and enlarge the artistic vista for black filmmakers," says BFC/A director Audrey T. McCluskey. "He showed that it is possible to make relevant and profitable films without catering to Hollywood's presumptions about race," she continues. "Having him at Indiana University as the BFC/A's Artist-In-Residence is a singular opportunity for students and the community at large to be tutored and engaged by a master craftsman and artist."

Crystal L. Keels, BFC/A Graduate Assistant, is completing a Ph.D. in the Department of English.



Melvin Van Peebles, BFC/A Artist-In-Residence, is joined by BFC/A staff members (from left to right) Tyrone Simpson, special projects coordinator, Audrey T. McCluskey, director, Crystal Keels, graduate assistant, and Natia Steans, work/study student. Missing is BFC/A archivist Jenny Beasley.